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## The World as Dick and Depression!

Werner Büttner looks at you like *what*. To paint a portrait of yourself masturbating at the cinema is to blot out the space reserved for you as a human in the chain of signification; to take the stage and say nothing (matters). He doesn't care how you see him, and finds your pair of eyes equivalent to any other. The picture is khaki, the protagonist dressed in muddled adjacent shades, but only because he exists in a world from which all other colours have fled. His dick is un-pornographically monstrous. Almost unrecognisable, the fat yellow blob is held by a hand rendered in grossly abstract strokes, as if anything that comes into contact with it is bound to frantic disintegration.

The sudden confrontation with dick is not like getting frisked at the airport. How someone might appreciate that moment because it outlines the empty space where physical intimacy was supposed to be; like being touched by the shadow of longing, the faint air of something meaningful – at least the humour of it comes with a real emotional attachment. No, when a dick comes out for no reason it's the end of something. The horizon smacks out of view like a roller blind. No more pretenses; fuck all and bye.

Does it make a difference whether you walk in on the dick, or meaning walks out on you? What I mean by meaning is that any one thing is not equivalent to the next – your eyes or mine – that it makes sense to move into the next moment and make an effort to *be there* and to take reign of that being. Can the loss of meaning – and its adjacent concepts signification, importance and particularity – occur irrespectively of your will, or is it necessarily a stance that you take, or an attitude you have assumed? I look at Büttner's paintings from the distance of forty years and wonder what the root of this nihilism is.

Unlike myself, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Die dritte Generation* is a contemporary of this suite of works. It was released in the spring of 1979, and its title refers to the, at that point fictional, third generation of the Red Army Fraction, notably little more than a year after the emblematic deaths of Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe in the fall of 1977. In Fassbinder's vision, this new litter of terrorists have lost sight of their agenda, speaking instead in political truisms that range from vague to empty. They call each other up on massive plastic phones muttering the code phrase "Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung" – the key work of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer first published in 1818, and traditionally translated as "The World as Will and Representation" – but what does it mean? The father of one of the group's members offers a neat summary: "That a human life is of the same value as a rock". That is to say, if the world is nothing but our various representations of it, largely standing in the way of will, of autonomy from time and space, there is no essential difference between things. „Back then, we read positive books!", the old man continues, "Hegel, for example. People today have forgotten what they live for, that's why every life needs a war. Then they'd regain sense of what makes a human life more valuable than a rock!"

This loss of signification is so resonant with Werner Büttner's paintings from this period. "Denn sie wissen, was sich gehört" (1983) – two hands meeting like God and Adam's in the Sistine Chapel, except these hands are those of hairy primates – asks not what is the difference between a human and a stone, but a man and a monkey. In the epic triptych "Transit I - Homo Erectus - Transit II" (1983, one helicopter lifts an elephant, another a howitzer around a giant may pole. There is a war going on here, it seems, it is just not one that is lent much gravity.

Without getting too deep in Schopenhauer, even the problem of translating his title into English speaks volumes. Some translations prefer "presentation" to "representation" for its emphasis on the performative aspect of "Vorstellung", which can also refer to a theatre play, something fictional and imagined. How loose can the signifier get? Both Büttner and Fassbinder speak to a world in which the reality of things is radically subordinate to how they are presented, and how we perceive them. All of life is a stage, every character wears a mask, and each presentation may be as true or untrue as the next. On that stage is another one: art. Minus times minus is plus, but can meta times meta – stage upon stage – break through the negative of perception in the same way? Put differently, do we need war to understand the difference

between a human life and a rock, or can art do some of that work for us? And following that, is Büttner's nihilism a way of giving up on that quest, or the opposite?

Büttner wanking at the movies illustrates a passive way of being in the world – of letting the world be. In "Sozialstaatimpression" (1980), he portrays the social state as a wounded gorilla in a composition not dissimilar to his self-portrait. Between these two works, it seems the artist – and perhaps the concept of masculinity more broadly – has arrived at *Endstation Dumbstick*, and the rest of society, also figured as male, is trailing right behind him.

But while the wanking itself suggests disinterest in the world (in psychoanalysis, autism is closely associated with auto-eroticism), making a painting of it does not. Like pop songs, these works give form to what you might have already been feeling, and, as such, relief. Or at least there is something to be seen here on the doubled stage of art that makes the depressed detachment if only slightly more comprehensible. This is not the same as criticality, or even self-consciousness – I don't get the impression Büttner sets out to be clever. Contrary to much of the later work, there also isn't a lot of humour to be found in these paintings. Rather, something weary, or worried moves across his canvasses. If it wasn't so melancholic, so fearful, I might describe it as care. Looking at the Michelangelo riff again, it is as if the hairy ape hands are not meeting, but losing their grip. Humanity – in Büttner, as in the Bible, always just Man, a big old *sic!* – is rendered as both debased and out of touch. Outside of what can be said about a crisis of masculinity, the crisis of signification evoked here, as in *Die dritte Generation*, is also of a more subjective kind; a crisis located at the disintegrating margins of sanity.

I recently came upon Rainald Goetz' debut novel *Insane* [orig. *Irre*] first published in 1983. In the novel, Goetz makes reference to Albert Oehlen, Diedrich Diederichsen, and what he calls "the new fun painting".<sup>1</sup> Looking at not just these works by Büttner, but a lot of what was made by his peers at the time, I'd reconsider whether fun is exactly the right word. No-fucks-left-to-give painting rolls less easily off the tongue. Goetz also contributed a text to Büttner, Oehlen, and Martin Kippenberger's *Malen ist Wahlen* exhibition catalogue in 1992, so he was part of the scene. But the kinship between *Insane* and Büttner's paintings has more to do with a certain dark and slanted way of seeing.

Through Goetz, we follow the young doctor Raspe as the boundaries between insanity – framed by the psychiatric clinic where he works – and its purported opposite, "society", begin to blur. "I do not want to become like Schlüssler, like Singer, like Reiter", Raspe thinks of his older colleagues, "I do not want to become like I am... Everything needs to be different. Everything makes no sense. So, nothing makes sense." *Insane* is a story about total subsumption and deep implication. On the weekends, "everything dissolves in alcohol", and as Raspe's own deterioration starts to mirror that of the patients', so the possibility of any distance, any enlightened, critical position, becomes untenable. Büttner's "Heroin für Bremen" (1979) is a vortex of grey, maybe an underground train tunnel. All that separates a person from the city around them is the skin, and how thin the skin is, in the end; how quickly everything can be absorbed into the same haze of speed. "From the kitchen, Raspe shouts: What's the point of wanting? Psychiatry shouts back: What? Raspe says: Doesn't matter." What's the point of painting? Why not jerk off at the cinema?

Works like Büttner's "Stilleben mit Wolpertinger und beschädigtem de Chirico" (1984) and "Moderne Kunst B" (1984) in particular figure the deranged and tormented perspective of the insane; gloomy, nightmarish interiors without architecture and gravity. Yet what they reference most explicitly is art, not madness. An idiosyncratic take on the mythical animal wolpertinger, duck-legged and rabbit-eared, sees something not unlike itself in a broken de Chirico painting. Likewise, while reading *Insane*, I kept wondering what the role of the artist, or art, is in Goetz' gallery of characters. As one of Raspe's friends suggests, "madness is revolt, man, madness is art!". That is, the insane themselves are the artists, who, as they smear their own shit onto the tiled walls of the institutions that contain them, lay bare the world's ills. But "apart from this question of will," rants the well-read pal, "apart from the fact that the insane person willingly chooses madness as an optimal mode of emancipated accommodation of state and capital .... Your job [- Raspe's -] at the clinic, at a psychiatric clinic, is the epitome of reactionary politics in action. A society that consistently makes its members ill, mentally ill in particular, employs psychiatry to help itself survive." Later on, Raspe – or some version of him, at that point closer to Goetz himself – does wonder whether he

“should ditch culture and go for Marxism”, he reasons, “Then at least I’d have something to hold on to”. But in the moment he’s not having the “mental masturbation shit”: “The crazies are crazy”, he retorts, “Take a look for yourself. And insanity is not art, not in the least, it’s not revolt. They’re poor devils, the insane, the insane are the poorest devils I know.”

So, there is a difference! Like war, the clinic has allowed Raspe to grasp it, but only fleetingly. For what the gradual conflation of the Raspe character with Goetz himself, a writer, suggests, is that you can never escape the influence of your subject, or your patients, just as you cannot help but exert your influence upon them. This, of course, is called power, and it usually comes unbalanced. So, does an artist such as Büttner (or a writer such as Goetz), rather than embody the pains of society, drag them onto a stage, like the old Professor Schlüssler drags Mr. Fottner, an involuntional melancholic described as “nothing more than a pair of house shoes”, in front of an audience of students? Goetz’ narrator notes that “most [students] seemed to sense quickly that [Schlüssler’s] ruthless honesty was nothing more than the entire horror, and therefore the truth, of psychiatry, and along with it the compromises the psychiatrist faced, the unreasonable demands of his office, which almost inevitably made him into a monster.”

In Büttner’s paintings we see some horror, and some truth, some meaninglessness, at least. And what we see in his self-portrait is that he is both patient and doctor. So, is the artist inevitably a monster? Or are those of us acting on the stage-on-stage of culture not, as it is sometimes argued, merely shooting blanks? Regardless, Schlüssler’s style of pedagogy has become mortally unfashionable. On the question of art, the jury is still out. All the same, forty years later, the sense has returned that there is some difference, after all, between a person and whatever else: a pair of house shoes, a gorilla, a rock. This is both for better and for worse.

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1 Goetz, Rainald, *Insane*, (Trans. Adrian Nathan West), London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017, p. 324.